

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator and our Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen. I want to begin this morning with a little bit of poetry. This poem is a favorite of mine. Admittedly I am not an expert on poetry and I'm not sure how I stumbled across this poem by British poet Wendy Cope, but this poem will help frame the way we approach our Gospel text today.

The Orange. "At lunchtime I bought a huge orange—The size of it made us all laugh. I peeled it and shared it with Robert and Dave— They got quarters and I had a half. And that orange, it made me so happy, as ordinary things often do, just lately. The shopping. A walk in the park. This is peace and contentment. It's new. The rest of the day was quite easy. I did all the jobs on my list and enjoyed them and had some time over. I love you. I'm glad I exist."

Cope's writing, simple and light, is a fun reminder of the gentleness we can carry as we approach the important concerns in our lives. Beauty resides in everyday items and love exists not in merely grand gestures but in the small things; a walk outdoors, shopping together, or splitting an orange between good friends. These are places where we can easily see God's love being reflected to one another.

In our scripture for today, we are reading about heavy topics; money, salvation, and sin. Whenever difficult issues like these come up, oftentimes the first reaction is to be judgmental of ourselves or others. We hear from a rich man, who comes

before Jesus and leaves dejected, for he would not let go of his wealth and follow Jesus.

The mind wanders to questions like, “Really Jesus? All of it? Can’t you cut this guy some slack? He didn’t even get a second offer?” It follows we start wondering where we are in the passage. We may feel the heaviness of our own judgement weighing us down.

Before this rich young man even begins to talk about money, he has a conversation about the commandments with Jesus. Jesus demonstrates humility and defers all goodness to God alone. Jesus then listens to the man as he explains he’s always kept all the commandments. I imagine Jesus with a big smile on his face at this point. How great is that? This guy has never broken any commandments! Not a single time. He really does deserve salvation, after all he really always follows the rules.

There are many important words in this Gospel text but the ones that stick out to me more than anything are in verse 21, “Jesus looking at him, LOVED him....” Jesus does not want to torment this young man. He is not trying to hang shame around his neck or convince him of his damnation. Jesus simply points out, as he observes the man with deep love, that money is something he knows he has a hard time with.

He cannot come before God and say that he is without blame, he too, falls short of the goodness of God. Basically, this man is not perfect.

It's okay. We are human and so is the wealthy man who approaches Jesus. He may come into the conversation with little humility but he certainly leaves with some. Jesus, who he calls teacher, truly does teach him a lesson.

Jesus teaches that all wealth and the power that comes along with it, is nothing when standing before God. Salvation is not earned by us, it isn't purchased with dollars, euros, or any other currency.

We can't store some of our salary away in a 401K and get it deposited over to God's checking account when we retire. Our salvation was purchased by Jesus in his act of sacrifice on the cross and His resurrection. All the power or wealth we can amass will always pale in comparison to that sacrifice, it can never be replaced.

In some ways, Jesus uses money but anything can be inserted. Nothing will ever replace the grace and mercy God has for us, no works will do. This man that came to Jesus could have wanted to hoard anything or had any fantastic skill that he would not use to glorify God. We know little about the man's wealth or relationship to it but we do know he came before the son of God, proud but left humble. "But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

Money is just a simple example because we all know about money and throughout time, it is a common stressor. Money comes with the understanding that we can

have something when we give it away. Jesus reminds us that mortals cannot sacrifice anything that would make them deserve the love of God.

Money is simply a tool. Our relationship to it is where things become complicated. If you're reading a parable that Jesus taught, there's a 1 in 7 chance that money will be part of the teaching. It's an important tool but it is not what defines us. No, our relationship to money is what makes it such a strong teaching tool. It's something that drives people to risk their lives, break relationships, and go to war for.

It becomes addictive, not the money itself, but the security and power that is yielded with it. I haven't checked today but for the last week, the number one program on Netflix has been a show called "Squid Game." In fact, the program has been number one in over 70 countries in the last few weeks. It's a fictional account but it's not far off from how far we will go to have money and what comes with it. We wouldn't be so drawn to it if it didn't tap into our fascination with money and all that spawns from the pursuit of it.

Any tool can be used in positive or negative ways. Money does not have to be a barrier for us in the way that it so often becomes. In fact, it can be a transformational tool. Giving to the poor, building places that all people can be cared for, giving to our congregation or community organizations that bring us together in love and service.

When we let go of the tight fist around our money and offer it freely to help others, we begin to form a healthier relationship with the tool and it is being used in ways that build up the kingdom of God, not tearing it apart.

This lesson brings us back again to humility and love. We must do nothing to earn the love of Jesus. He observes us and loves us. He loves you the way that you are. Both broken and sinful, as well as, created in God's image and beloved. We are called over and over again to love God and love our neighbor. Money for the man that Jesus speaks with is a tool that has become an idol. It can consume us in the illusion of power that it brings. Jesus knows well that the only power any mortal commands is temporary, God's power is eternal.

Being generous and humble with money allows us to let go of the power money has over us. We can turn it over to others who are impoverished, build systems where all are welcomed and cared for, and find our happiness and fulfillment elsewhere. Celebrate those small moments in life we spend with our friends.

The fulfillment that comes when the day is easy and our needs are met. If we lift those moments up, we no longer must cling to our pursuit for more. We can be thankful for what God provides and passionately pursue justice with EVERY tool that we have, for every neighbor that we have.

Let us pray. Thank you, Lord, for as you look upon us, we know you are filled with love. Remind us that this love is our fulfillment. Let go of the things in life that we put over you. When there is injustice in the world, move us to use every tool that we have to lift up our neighbors. Amen.